

Student Government Washington Football Team Proposal

April 4, 2016

The Student Government has reached consensus on the following statement:

Gyasi Ross illuminated the offensive nature of the Washington Football Team's name. Our Quaker values of equality and community compel us to amplify the voices of the Native American community. The dress code states that "children may not wear clothing with messages or images on clothing that conflict with the School's values." Thus, we have reached the consensus that Washington Football Team apparel (i.e. clothing with the team's logo or official name, as long as it contains the word "Redskins") is in direct violation of our dress code, and should be enforced like any other violation.

In our capacity as advocates for the greater good of Sidwell Friends School students, we are presented a difficult choice: continue the same policies and allow a racial slur in our school environment or alternatively ensure Sidwell Friends is a safe space for all students and encourage growth. At this junction, we can simply follow the voice of the past and keep our hands off of the school dress code. Or we can demur from this group to carve out a new vision for Sidwell.

We hope that, by discouraging Washington Football Team apparel, we will guide the educated Sidwell student down a path of ensuring social justice for all members of society. Our school needs to be a place where students can learn to confront and tackle divisive issues like the Washington Football Team's name. No matter our *intent* in wearing Washington Football Team apparel, as Gyasi Ross told us, its *impact* perpetuates stereotypes and takes the voice away from Native Americans in our society. The school's duty is to protect and uphold our philosophy, which states: "Differences among us enhance intellectual inquiry, expand understanding, and deepen empathy."

In discussion with the entire student body following collection, many have voiced concern over our attempt to limit a basic freedom of expression. Sidwell Friends School is exactly that: a school. While our ultimate goal is creating a safe space for each and every student, we acknowledge that such a pure, unequivocal safety for all is impossible. As an institution, Sidwell should not destroy itself over censorship. Part of the beauty of a Sidwell education is the exposure to a diversity of perspectives, and the moment we start removing these thoughts -- no matter their content -- is the moment we lose the "dynamic educational community" we so cherish and strive to ensure. Sidwell's role is not to teach the student *what* to think, but rather *how* to think critically and challenge the status quo. We believe that this policy reinforces such critical thinking, compelling students to think about offensive encounters in their daily lives. What distinguishes Sidwell Friends School from other high schools and organizations across the world? Our unique interpretation of Quaker Values at an elite, privileged institution demand us "to work courageously for peace."

Yet this decision does not come without concern that we are forcing a policy "down the throats" of students who, while they will comply with the action of the dress code enforcement, will not understand the spirit of its message. The goal of removing the Washington Football Team name is to enforce a culture of respect for minority voices, and this policy is only one step toward achieving that goal. The Student Government hopes this enforcement will open dialogues between students, faculty, and staff about the value we place on social justice and the means we will go to in order to achieve it. We don't ask that every member of Sidwell's diverse community agree with this decision, but rather for everyone to respect its spirit.